DOCUMENT: 850-035/009

28TH ANNUAL PREMIERS' CONFERENCE

EDUCATION - A PLAN OF ACTION FOR CANADIANS TOWARD THE 21st CENTURY

(Saskatchewan)

August 26-28, 1987
Saint John, New Brunswick

PLEASE NOTE

This document is made available by the Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat (CICS) for education and/or information purposes only. Any misuse of its contents is prohibited, nor can it be sold or otherwise used for commercial purposes. Reproduction of its contents for purposes other than education and/or information requires the prior authorization of the CICS.

EDUCATION - A PLAN OF ACTION
FOR CANADIANS TOWARD THE 21ST CENTURY

"The capacity of a nation to generate new ideas, to adapt to change, to innovate, to make the most effective use of its natural resources and to improve its productivity and international competitiveness are all critically dependent upon an educated citizenry." [1]

Saskatchewan, as with other provinces, is highly dependent upon trade for its economic well-being. This is true whether we are talking about our traditional resource-based economy or that part of our economy which has successfully diversified, such as the advanced technology industry. Our success in trade is dependent upon our ability to successfully compete in the international economy. In order to successfully compete internationally we need to ensure that we maintain and increase our areas of competitive advantage. The one area most critical to the success of such action and in which we have yet to mount a joint, concerted effort, is the education system.

We are entering a post-industrial society based to an increasing extent upon the generation and distribution of information and knowledge. Regional economic development and diversification no longer means trying to duplicate industrial and manufacturing bases all over Canada. Rather, it means using the tools of the new information society to build on existing strengths and existing comparative advantages. One of the great economic strengths of the regions of Canada is our highly educated and highly skilled workforce -- our educated citizenry.

Each region has quite naturally built up areas of expertise and knowledge bases in line with its existing natural resources and major industries. For example, Saskatchewan has a long history of research and development attached to the agriculture industry of this region, and we are currently enhancing this link by building an Agriculture Science Building at the University of Saskatchewan over the next five years.

However, sensitivity to the economy and regional development does not begin and end with the post secondary education system. It is not enough to simply encourage the development of highly qualified personnel in our universities. The universities depend upon the development of a pool of candidates who are literate in a wide range of subjects (language, mathematics, science, etc.)

---

1. An extract from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council Second Five-Year Plan, "Completing the Bridge to the 90's", Preface, p.vi

A post-industrial information society will rely more and more upon our ability to encourage the teaching and learning of a broad range of subjects and skills. Continuity is required throughout all levels of the education system. Indeed, we can go one step farther -- if we want our education programs to be successful in promoting the sciences, we will have to develop a high degree of literacy in all our students. Recent data shows that we still have this task ahead of us in Canada, as evidenced by Annex I.

The enhancement of research and development in the regions of Canada is, therefore, not a simple task. Money alone will not do it. No amount of short term government funding directed at university and private sector research will be able to make up for the fact that we are lacking in the one basic ingredient which will provide our regional and global economies with the long term economic, comparative advantage we seek, and that is a highly skilled, highly qualified pool of expertise and knowledge. This highly qualified pool of intellectual capital cannot be created piecemeal nor can it be created in isolation from the goals, objectives, and programs we establish for the education mainstream from which we obtain these pools.

Outside of the family unit itself, there is no stronger, more pervasive set of structures which define our community of human relations than the education system. It is our "great leveller", the means by which society ensures our most basic democratic right is encouraged and protected, and that is "opportunity": opportunity to participate fully in a society where all citizens are first class citizens, opportunity to participate in the job market and the workplace, opportunity to acquire a decent standard of living and secure the future for our children.

In addition to the individual opportunities education affords us, our system of education provides the basic human investment in knowledge and research to make us competitive in the international economy and to allow us to act as leaders in international statesmanship. It is difficult to overstate what we have at stake in the continued development of a comprehensive, rational system of education.

To a large extent, we still enjoy a system of education which is tried and proven, and which serves us well. As already mentioned, a highly competitive and rapidly changing world driven by new information technolgies and shifting global economies demands that our education system keep pace. This imperative, and the enormous costs associated with it, require that we act in a concerted and focussed fashion. Governments at all levels have a history of examining and building the education system piecemeal as if the parts did not relate to the whole. Governments have also tended, therefore, to develop funding programs accordingly. We can no longer afford this luxury.

The enormous and growing costs associated with the education system also mean that we can no longer afford a narrow jurisdictional focus. This has created unnecessary duplication of effort and programs, particularly at the post-secondary level. A regional focus based on comparative advantage is required in order to develop a more rational basis for programming and sharing costs, such as has been the case with the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. This same focus should be extended to other areas, as well as to research and development.

A sensitivity to the demands of the labour market is necessary. A balance must be struck between education programming geared to specific occupational skills and programming geared toward generalist skills. In a tight labour market, such as exists in Western Canada, it is necessary to give graduates as much flexibility as possible to participate in a broad sector of the labour market.

The standard response to a recognition of the importance of education has been to "throw more money at it". However, international comparisons suggest that Canada's commitment of resources is already relatively large. Both as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product and in terms of expenditures per capita, Canada spends more public money on education than other major OECD countries (See Annex II).

While incremental resources in specific areas may be required, it would seem that we should look elsewhere for the source of perceived inadequacies in our educational system. What seems to be required, rather, is a refocussing of the current level of resources as part of a national strategy for education.

To be comprehensive, such a strategy would need to deal with five major objectives:

1. Ensure that the population-at-large is instilled with the basic skills necessary for success in modern life.

   This is concerned largely with elementary and secondary schools. However, there is a significant need to address the development of skills and knowledge at all levels. We need to address the development of basic language, science and mathematic skills. We must look at ways of encouraging more advanced skills, and we should take steps to combat adult illiteracy.

2. Ensure that post-secondary training provides first-class, market relevant skills.

   This means to Saskatchewan that specific job training must be balanced with the broader, generalist skills.

3. Ensure that reserach and development is nourished in areas of importance across Canada.

   This includes the development of regional "centres of excellence" across Canada at the post-secondary level. It also includes the development of the highly qualified skills needed to fuel our research and development.

4. Ensure that that the most appropriate measures are taken to maintain the quality of education in a time of fiscal constraint.

   We need to look at the multi-layered system of funding education at all levels.

5. Ensure that all levels of education are linked in a way that makes the most sense -- both in terms of funding and programs.

   This objective concerns the way in which the various levels of education have tended to operate separately and often in different directions. In Saskatchewan we are trying to address this problem by bringing the different actors together in broad, policy forums. A forum of this type for example, is being held in Saskatoon in October of 1987, in order to address post-secondary issues.

It is important to take the five objectives listed above as a whole. In particular, it will not be good enough to concentrate only on the "upper end" (i.e., university centres of excellence). The realities of the information age are such that a well-trained elite is not enough - all levels in society must be able to deal with the new technologies and the new challenges.

Clearly, a broad review of the education system is required in considerable depth. Not only is a great deal at stake in terms of opportunity, but there are a large number of active stakeholders in the administration and funding of education. Funding occurs through municipal, provincial and federal tax regimes; the administration of the education system occurs at the municipal and community level; and standards and curriculum are set at the provincial level. Despite a common interest in increasing interprovincial access to education and job opportunities across provinces, what exists today at the post-secondary level is an imbalance between reciprocity on one hand (in the form of ad hoc interprovincial training agreements) and protectionism on the other (in the form of admittance guidelines which allow entrance to provincial residents first and foremost).

In order to develop a strategy and plan of action for achieving the objectives set out in this paper, an interprovincial working mechanism would be needed. For example, the Ministers responsible for education and for issues related to the labour market could form a working group. This working group could then report back to the 29th Annual Premiers' Conference in 1988 with their recommendations for a Plan of Action, how it would become operative, and how the various stakeholders would be involved. In proposing such a process, the working group might consider such items as: the examination of interprovincial and regional mechanisms which would remove barriers to education and labour market opportunities, ways in which the required highly qualified pool of expertise and knowledge can be developed, how we can build on our regional strengths and advantages, effective means of funding and administering the education system, ways in which shared education programs and standards can be development, and recommendations for policy and program priorities.

ANNEX I: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN CANADA, 1986

In 1986, nearly one third (27%) of Canadian people had less than a Grade 9 education. The incidence of low educational attainment was lowest among the population group 45 years of age and under while levels of low achievement amongst older age groups remain high.

LOW EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN CANADA, 1986

Province	% of Population with Low Attainment
Newfoundland	30%
New Brunswick	27%
Quebec	26%
P.E.I. & Saskatchewan	22%
Nova Scotia & Manitoba	21%
Ontario	18%
B.C. & Alberta	12% (lowest)

The incidence of lower educational attainment declined in all provinces between 1975 and 1985, with the greatest declines evident in Prince Edward Island (11%), Saskatchewan (10%), British Columbia and Manitoba (6%), but the changes were largely due to age group population shifts.

ANNEX II: EXPENDITURES ON EDUCATION IN CANADA, 1986

Relative Expenditures on Education

Country	Total Expenditures as a % of GDP	Total Public Expenditures per Capita
Canada	7.2	977
U.S.A.	6.8	869
France	4.7	624
Japan	4.1	510
West Germany	4.1	496
U.K.	5.4	464

Sources: UNESCO statistical Yearbook; 1986 European Forum on International Competitiveness.